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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of a training package for teaching behavioral contractors to conduct initial assessment interviews was evaluated. Verbal responses including professional conduct statements, behavioral assessment questions, and positive process statements were targeted for instruction. Training consisted of written prompts and quizzes, rehearsal, feedback, and a negative reinforcement contingency. Responses of trainees and either role-played or volunteer clients were recorded during a series of simulated assessment interviews. Results obtained within a multiple-baseline across subjects design indicated that written prompts and quizzes, rehearsal, and feedback were effective in increasing targeted verbal behaviors of trainees. In addition, responses of role-played and unscripted clients to behavioral assessment questions also increased after training. The effects of adding continuous feedback and the negative reinforcement contingency were inconsistent across subjects. (Author)

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Training Behavioral Contractors to Conduct Initial Assessment Interviews[1]

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Running Head: Interviewing Skills

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Training Behavioral Contractors to Conduct Initial Assessment Interviews

Behavioral interventions are usually preceded by assessment interviews in which questions are directed to clients or mediators, and information is obtained determining therapy goals and procedures. Suggested formats for initial assessment interviews are available for behavior therapists (Craighead, Kazdin, & Mahoney, 1976; Gottman & Leiblum, 1974; Kanfer & Grimm, 1977; Morganstern, 1976) and school psychologists (Bergan, 1977). Although assessment interviews are a general first step in behavioral treatment, guidelines for interviewing in other behavioral services have yet to be fully developed.

Few of the existing interviewing formats specify desired interviewer responses in a manner permitting a quanitative analysis of the interview. In one notable exception, Bergan (1977) presents exact definitions for verbal behavior sought from an interviewer, and a scheme for coding verbal responses of both interviewer and client. Such specification offers several advantages for training and application of assessment formats. First, this approach allows delineation of criteria for interviewer performance, whereby occurrences of target responses within interviews can be counted and interviewer performance evaluated relative to a numerical standard. Second, if categories of verbal responses desired from client as well as interviewer are specified, then interviewer effectiveness can be directly evaluated by observing the number of relevant client responses elicited during an interview. Lastly, this quantification permits objective appraisal of programs designed to teach interviewing skills on their ability to increase targeted responses with training.

At present, only little research has been conducted on effective procedures for training skills used in behavioral assessment interviews (Haynes, 1978). In contrast, a considerable number of studies on teaching traditional interviewing-techniques have been reported in the literature. Previous studies have taught interviewing skills through the use of modeling, behavioral rehearsal, and feedback (Bailey, Deardorff, & Nay, 1977), and these procedures plus instructions (Danish, D'Augelli, & Brock, 1976). Typically, training involves exposure to live or videotaped models who demonstrate desired interview responses. An alternative strategy might employ written instructional materials rather than modeling and instructions. Advantages of this latter approach include less reliance on expert instructors or audiovisual equipment, and a corresponding decrease in training costs. Fawcett and his associates have successfully used this approach to teach complex social behaviors such as public speaking (Fawcett & Miller, 1975), community canvassing (Fawcett, Miller, & Braukmann, 1977), and community proctoring (Mathews & Fawcett, 1977). We examined the feasibility of a training packaged based on written materials for teaching specific responses in assessment interviewing.

In the present study, a format for assessment interviews was constructed for a university-based behavioral contracting service. Desired interviewer and client verbal responses were categorized and taught to psychology interns through a training package incorporating written prompts, matching-to-sample exercises, performance feedback, and incentives. Efficacy of the training procedure was evaluated within a multiple-baseline design, with occurrence of targeted interviewer responses as the dependent variable. Interviewer effectiveness, in terms of control of client verbal behavior was also assessed

in the present research. The number of targeted client responses elicited within interviews was measured concurrently with the dependent variable and related to changes in experimental conditions.

Method

Subjects

Five male and three female students from a psychology course in behavior contracting at Western Michigan University participated in the study as part of a class practicum requirement. Four of the subjects were graduate students; the remaining four were advanced undergraduates.

Setting and Simulated Interviews

Verbal interviewing responses were elicited in a series of eight to nine simulated assessment interviews conducted by each subject. Students performed interviews in a small office room across a table from a "client". Verbal responses were recorded with a cassette tape recorder located on the table. Interviews were timed by a clock placed in the subjects' view and were terminated after 20 minutes by the sound of a kitchen timer.

A written sheet of instructions was given to each subject prior to undertaking an interview, asking him/her to behave as an intern with the Psychology Department's Behavioral Contracting Service conducting an initial interview with a real client. Also contained in the instructions was the forthcoming client's name, age, occupation, general problem description, and a reminder to end the interview in 20 minutes. During that time, subjects were to: 1) obtain sufficient information for analyzing the client's major problems and developing a contracting program; and 2) establish a positive relationship with the client so that (s)he would return for further treatment.

Subjects conducted interviews with two types of "clients": research assistants role-playing client scripts; and unscripted volunteers. Neither role-playing assistants nor unscripted volunteers were informed of the study's experimental design. Role-played and unscripted interviews were presented in random order, with each subject conducting a minimum of eight interviews.

Role-played clients: Scripts were written describing seven hypothetical clients each having a single problem behavior. Each contained a description of the client and his or her presenting problem, and a set of standardized responses to behavioral assessment questions. A sample script follows:

> Client: Samantha Reed
> Age: 21
> Occupation: Student
>
> Major Complaint: "It doesn't seem to matter what the activity is, I'm always late. I'm tardy for classes, late to meetings, and even dates." Specification and Dimensions: Client may be from 5 minutes to 1½ hours late to any meeting. Rather than attending very late, she frequently skips meetings. Has classes five days a week at 9:00 A.M. and meetings twice a week from 6:00 P.M., and arrives late about 50% of the time. Onset: This has been a problem for about two years, ever since the client moved away from home. Antecedents: Client doesn't get up on time, while involved in work she may "forget" what time it is, or may be detained by roommates or friends. Consequences: Client can sleep later, dresses and eats at a leisurely pace, and finishes more work before leaving for an appointment. Occasionally has arguments with friends about her lateness. Has missed class assignments and lectures due to her tardiness. Prior Treatments and Outcome: Client has tried making New Year resolutions and promises to her friends to be prompt, but with little success. Priority: Client wishes to first work on this problem and perhaps later contract for completing school assignments.

Three research assistants each role played two client scripts while a fourth assistant portrayed a single client. Assistants practiced scripted responses until they stated they were comfortable with the characterizations. Assistants were told to role play their scripts in a consistent fashion across interviewers, and to respond as though in an actual interview.

Unscripted Probes. In at least one of the interviews conducted by each subject, the "clients" were volunteers presenting an actual problem which they had previously considered treating with behavioral contracting. Two female volunteers performed a total of 10 unscripted interviews during the study. Volunteers were instructed to always act as though they were undergoing their first interview with the contracting service, but to otherwise behave as normally as possible.

Interviewer Response Measures

Based on previously published formats for behavioral assessment interviews (Bergan, 1977; Craighead, Kazdin, & Mahoney, 1976; Kanfer & Grimm, 1977), and on existing guidelines for conducting interviews within the Behavioral Contracting Service (BCS), 30 verbal responses were targeted for training. The targeted interviewer responses are listed in Table 1.[2] Each response was rated on an occurrence/non-occurrence basis for one 20-minute interview. To facilitate their description, the interviewer responses were organized into three categories: professional conduct statements, behavioral assessment questions, and positive process statements.

Professional Conduct Statements. Responses in this category were selected to ensure that interviewers correctly: introduced themselves; described behavioral contracting procedures and BCS policies; and requested approval of the treatment modality. A sample response definition for a statement in this category is given below:

Gives salutation: Says "Hi", "Hello", or "May I help you?"

Behavioral Assessment Questions. Questions in this category attempted to identify target behaviors and their controlling variables. Information requested included: problem behavior specification; time of onset; physical dimensions;

antecedents; consequences; prior attempts to alleviate problem and associated outcome; importance ranking; treatment goals; specification of potential reinforcers; and consent for behavior recording. A sample definition for a question in this category follows:

Asks about antecedent stimuli and settings. Requests that the client describe times, places, events, or people associated with the occurrence of the problem behavior. Examples: "Where exactly in the house do you do most of your work?" or "When do you usually smoke?"

Positive Process Statements. Responses in this category demonstrated that interviewers had positive affect, and were attending to the client. Statements in this category included: rewording of the client statements; restatement of assessment procedures; suggestion of positive outcome of treatment; and suggestion of client's normality. A sample response definition for a statement in this category is given below:

Suggests normality of client's behavior. Describes client's problem as afflicting people besides the client. Examples" "Well, it is not unusual to gain weight as you get older." or "I've had that problem too."

Client Response Measures

The quality of questions asked by interviewers was indirectly assessed by analyzing verbal responses elicited from role-played and unscripted clients. Fifteen client responses (see Table 2) were rated on an occurrence/non-occurrence basis for each 20-minute interview. Recorded were client verbalizations giving: relevant behavior assessment information; or approval for contracting procedures. Two sample client response definitions follow:

Approves or disapproves of treatment by behavioral contracting. Client states this treatment is either acceptable or unacceptable.

Describes antecedent stimuli and settings. Client gives times, places, events, or people associated with the occurrence of the problem behavior. Examples: "I'm usually late to social-get-togethers, but never to business appointments" or "It happens mostly in the office."

Reliability

All audiotapes were rated by two research assistants blind to the current experimental conditions, or by the first and second authors. For 25.6% of the tapes, two observers independently rated the same recording to assess inter-observer reliability. A minimum of two reliability checks were performed on data from each subject, one taken in each experimental phase.

Reliability was computed by dividing the number of response-by-response agreements by the number of agreements plus disagreements, and multiplying by 100. This formula was used to compute occurrence, non-occurrence, and overall percentages of agreement for interviewer and client responses. Mean percentages of agreement on occurrence, non-occurrence, and overall reliability were 79.2%, 77.1%, and 89.7% for interviewer behavior, and 73.4%, 63.6%, and 83.6% for client behavior, respectively.

Procedure

Baseline. Before conducting their first interview in this phase, all subjects were assigned to read and were formally tested on Writing Behavioral Contracts (DeRisi & Butz, 1975). Through this and all subsequent conditions, subjects met once a week for regular classes in behavioral contracting. The usual class format included: readings in research on behavioral contracting; class discussions; contracting exercises between class members; and designing contracting projects to be implemented in the students' natural environment.

A general description of BCS and its operating procedures was also given to subjects prior to their first interview. However, protocol for interviewing within the Service was not discussed during class, in any systematic fashion, throughout the length of the study.

Training. A brief training procedure incorporating written prompts and quizzes, rehearsal, and feedback was employed. Following subjects' last baseline interview, each received a copy of the interviewer and client response definitions, and a rationale for its use. To ensure that definitions were read and understood, subjects completed two short matching-to-sample tests before practicing target responses. Test stimuli in both quizzes were transcribed responses from a sample interview, which subjects matched with categories in the response definition list.

After completing the two tests, subjects met in pairs for practice sessions during which they alternately role played clients and rehearsed interviewer responses. One experimenter observed each pair of subjects and provided specific feedback to the individual rehearsing interviewer responses. Experimenters scored the occurrence or non-occurrence of each target response on a sheet listing all interviewer and client responses, and showed results to subjects at the end of a practice interview. Training terminated when each subject had practiced interviewer responses and received feedback twice. Students were allowed to retain their copy of the response definitions for the remainder of the study; however, they were never permitted to use the lists during an interview. All subjects completed the above procedure prior to their first training condition interview. The total time required to train one pair of subjects was approximately two hours.

Addition of Continuous Feedback and Reinforcement. In order to check a decline in responding observed in three subjects (S2,S5, and S6), the feedback procedure was altered, and a reinforcement contingency was introduced. Performance feedback on their last completed interview was now given to subjects before starting an interview. Research assistants rated tape recordings to provide feedback, which was presented to subjects on score sheets identical to those used in practice sessions.

A negative reinforcement contingency permitted subjects to terminate their participation at 8 or 9 interviews, if they emitted 80% of the targeted responses in all of their subsequent interviews. To sustain motivation in three subjects (S2,S7,S8), who failed to meet criterion in their first interview following announcement of the contingency, a modified contingency was employed. These individuals were given a "second chance", and could terminate their series by a criterion performance in their eighth or ninth interview.

Experimental Design

A multiple baseline design across subjects assessed effects of training. Students received response definitions and training after either their third, fourth, or fifth interview.

Results

Interviewer Responses

Figure 1 shows individual subject data during baseline and training conditions. Averaged across all subjects, the mean percentage of targeted interviewer responses emitted during baseline was 30.3%, after training this value increased to 75.1%. Mean between-condition gains for individual subjects ranged from a low

34.3% (S4) to a high of 56.9% (S1). The addition of continuous feedback and the contingency produced mixed effects. Gains were observed in three subjects (S2,S5,S6) following introduction of the procedure; however, procedural changes were associated with response decrements in two other subjects (S1,S8). Upon termination of the study, seven out of eight subjects met criterion, emitting at least 80% of the trained responses in their final interview.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Client Responses

Figure 2 gives the mean percent of targeted responses emitted by interviewers and clients, in role-played and unscripted interviews, both prior and subsequent to training. Averaged across the two types of interview, the mean percentage of targeted client responses occurring in baseline was 39.7%, following training this value increased to 75.4%. The mean percentage of targeted client responses occurring in subjects' final interview was 83.0%.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Comparison of Role-played and Unscripted Interviews

Data obtained from role-played and unscripted simulations are presented separately in Figure 2 to allow their comparison. During baseline, mean differences in performance between role-played and unscripted interviews were .3% and 3.1% for interviewer and client responses, respectively. In training, these mean differences were respectively, 4.8% and .9%.

Discussion

Results indicated that a training package consisting of written prompts and quizzes, rehearsal, and feedback was effective in teaching verbal interviewing skills. The multiple-baseline across subjects design showed the percent of target behaviors emitted during interviews increased only as training was administered to individual students. Without training, participation in the contracting class and practice in conducting interviews were insufficient to produce gains in desired interviewer responses.

Client responses occurring in an interview were also examined in this study, as an indirect measure of interviewer proficiency in eliciting relevant client information. Data show that the number of targeted client responses which occurred in a session covaried with the number of targeted interviewer responses emitted, and that both increased following training. This suggests that interviewers can be trained to obtain more useful information from their clients by modifying the questions they ask within sessions. Role-played interviews in the present research were scripted interactions, standardized as much as possible across subjects. The degree to which these simulations resembled actual contracting situations was partially assessed by comparisons with unscripted interviews. Comparisons showed that differences in interviewer and client performance within role-played versus unscripted interviews were minor relative to differences observed between experimental conditions.

The additional effects of continuous feedback and the escape contingency when combined with the initial training package are, unfortunately, less clear. Although this condition appears to have improved scores in three subjects for which it was intended (S2,S5,and S6), immediate effects on remaining subjects

were inconsistent. One problem may have been that escape was an ineffective incentive because conducting interviews was only a moderately unpleasant task. Two subjects, when told of the escape contingency remarked that they "didn't mind" doing the roleplays. Future research could explore the use of more potent reinforcers for improving performance (e.g. grades).

In the present study, written exemplars were used to initiate desired interviewer responses rather than the modeling or oral instructions employed in previous training programs. The success of this procedural substitution shows that modeling and live instructions are not essential procedures in training verbal interviewing skills. These findings conflict with the accepted use of these techniques in current therapist training programs (Danish et al., 1976). Our results indicate that providing trainees with specific response definitions, and inducing them to perform desired behaviors with feedback will establish those target responses.

We began this research by defining a priori the function of initial assessment interviews. Assessment interviews were seen as interactions wherein therapists elicit information, in the form of the client's verbal responses, which are employed to construct therapy goals and procedures. Training was designed to improve interviewer's descriptions of services, frequency of positive statements, and specificity of question-asking. There is an obvious problem in establishing a goal of improving the quality of questions asked: the value of responses elicited by any means is uncertain, for verbal self-report may have little correspondence with actual events or behavior (Begelman & Hersen, 1973; Israel, 1978). The present study did not address this weakness inherent in the interviewing

process. but rather attempted to improve the efficiency of interviewing, given its usual limitations. Results show this attempt was successful, and the common use of interviewing in varied behavioral services should give this finding practical value.

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Footnotes

[1] The authors wish to thank Beverly S. Adler and Ann LeFevre for their assistance throughout this study. Reprints may be obtained from Stephen E. Wong, Psychological Services Component, Department of Psychology, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008, or Brian A. Iwata, Department of Behavioral Psychology, The John F. Kennedy Institute, 707 North Broadway, Baltimore, Maryland 21205.

[2] A complete list of interviewer and client verbal response definitions is available from the first author on request.

Table 1

Interviewer Verbal Responses

A. Professional Conduct Statements

1. Gives salutation
2. Gives first and last name
3. Describes official position with Behavioral Contracting Service
4. Describes BCS's affiliation
5. Describes BCS staffing and supervision
6. Describes policy of confidentiality
7. States that behavioral contracting involves defining a problem behavior
8. States that contracting requires specification of a behavioral or product goal
9. States that contracting involves negotiation of completion dates approaching the goal
10. States that contracting involves that the client deposit a valued item with the BCS
11. States that BCS will permanently retain the item if the contract is not fulfilled
12. Requests approval of treatment by behavioral contracting
13. Schedules next appointment

B. Behavioral Assessment Questions

1. Elicits general description of problems
2. Requests additional description of problems
3. Requests approval of an operationally defined target behavior
4. Asks about onset of problem
5. Asks for significant dimensions of problem behavior
6. Asks about current antecedent stimuli and settings
7. Asks about current consequent stimuli
8. Asks about prior attempts to alleviate the problem
9. Asks about outcome of prior attempts
10. Requests prioritization of problem behaviors
11. Requests specification of treatment goals
12. Requests specification of potential reinforcers or punishers
13. Requests behavior recording procedures

C. Positive Process Statements

1. Restates and summarizes client statements
2. Restates and summarizes assessment or treatment procedures
3. Suggests positive outcome of treatment
4. Suggests normality of client's disorder

Table 2

Client Verbal Responses

A. Consent Statements

1. Approves or disapproves of treatment by behavioral contracting
2. Agrees or does not agree to behavior recording procedures
3. Approves or disapproves scheduled appointment

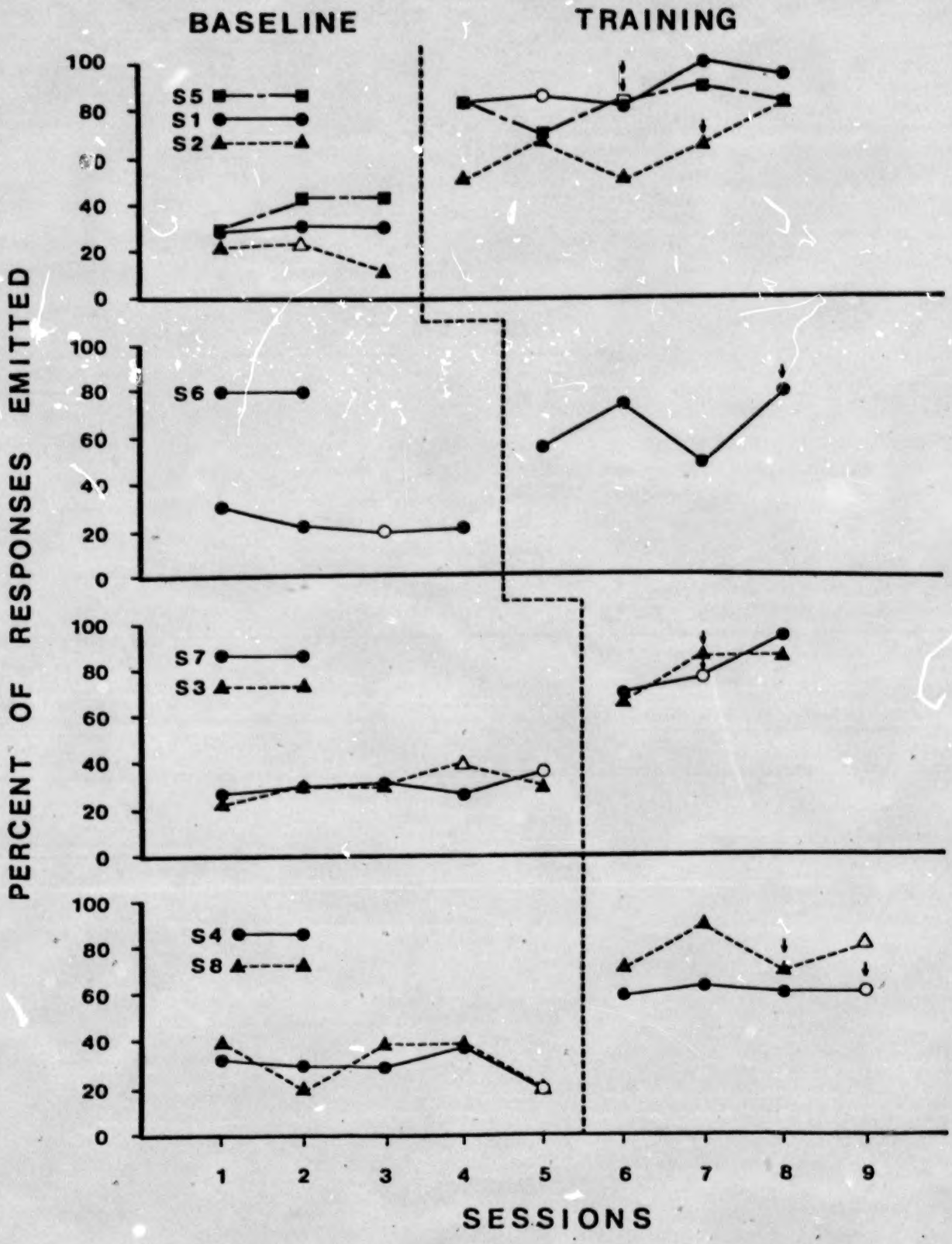
B. Behavioral Assessment Information

1. Gives general description of problems
2. Gives additional description of problems
3. Approves or disapproves of operationally defined target behavior
4. Describes onset of problem
5. Describes significant dimensions of problem behavior
6. Describes antecedent stimuli and settings
7. Describes current consequent stimuli
8. Describes prior attempts to alleviate problem
9. Describes outcome of prior attempts
10. Prioritizes problem behaviors
11. Specifies treatment goals
12. Specifies potential reinforcers or punishers

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Percent of interviewer responses emitted by individual subjects during baseline and training conditions. Closed points indicate performance during role-played simulations, open points show scores from unscripted interviews. Arrows identify first interview conducted after addition of continuous feedback and escape contingency.

Figure 2. Mean percent of responses emitted by interviewers and clients, in role-played and unscripted interviews, during baseline and training conditions.


BASELINE
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PERCENT OF RESPONSES EMITTED
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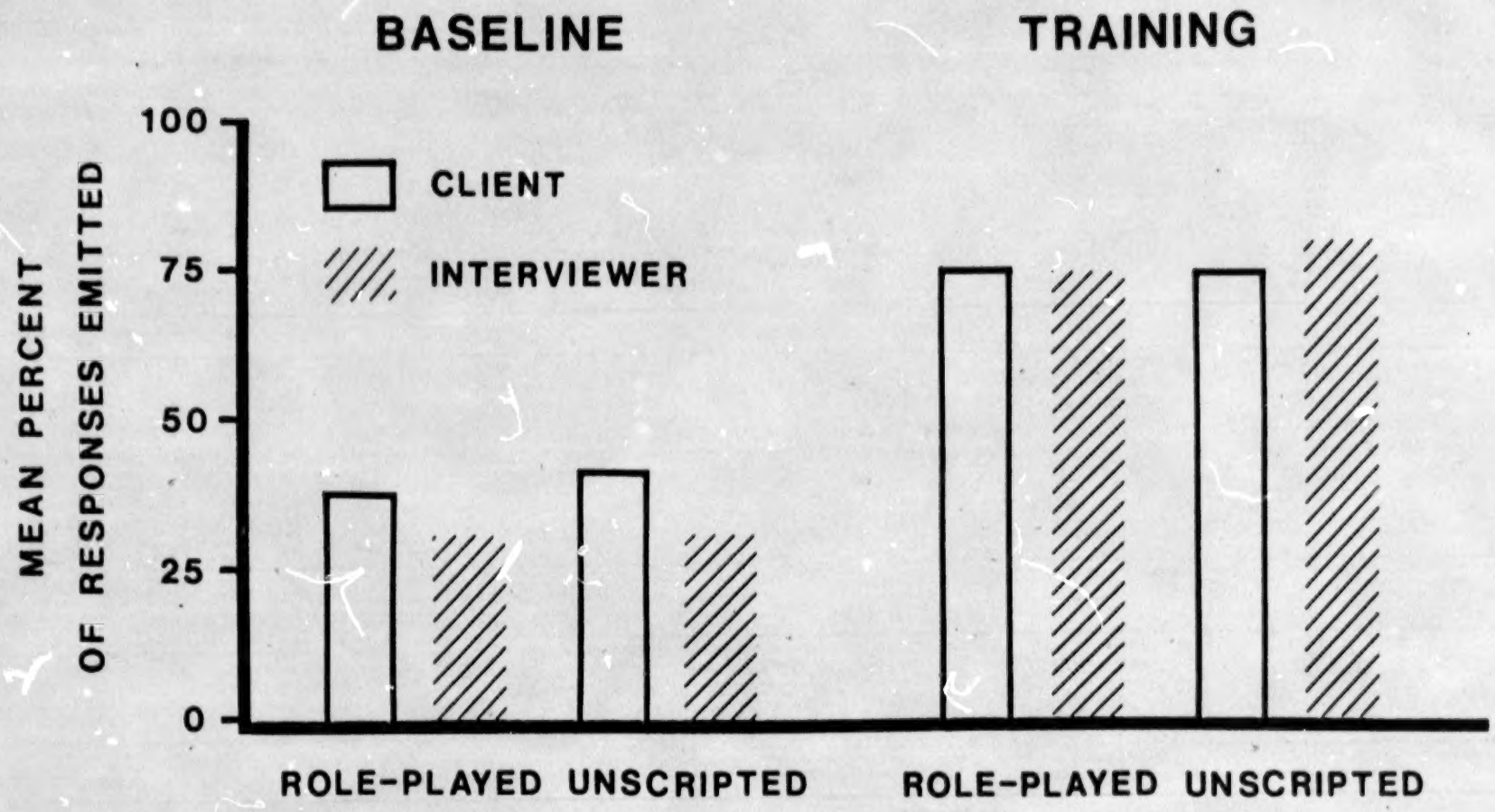
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MEAN PERCENT OF RESPONSES EMITTED
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